DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 129 SP 038 205

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TITLE A Re-examination of Classroom Rules.
PUB DATE 1998-10-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 14-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Codes of Ethics; Discipline; Elementary Secondary Education; Moral Values; *Student Behavior; *Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Student Relationship; Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Rules and Regulations

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a research-based examination of classroom management that focuses on six classroom rules. The paper's introduction contains a discussion that establishes the importance of effective classroom management strategies and an investigation of the literature to gain a better understanding of ineffective and effective rules. The six classroom rules are: (1) rules must be rational, consistent, and easily understood; (2) rules must address the desired behavior and answer two questions: Is the rule necessary? and Is a specific behavior targeted in the rule?; (3) too many rules may defeat the behavioral or academic purpose, and too many rules can result in rules that are not enforced; (4) rules must fit within the structure of the school's code of conduct and be consistent with the school's culture, and they should be stated positively; (5) rules must address the ethics or moral behavior desired; and (6) the rule must include the roles of primary stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, parents, and administrators). (SM)

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A Re-examination of Classroom Rules

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PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE
MID-WESTERN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
ASSOCIATION

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

OCTOBER 14-17, 1998

Re-examination of Classroom Rules

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Abstract

This paper is designed to provide a contemplative, research-based coverage regarding classroom management by examining classroom rules. The introduction contains a discussion establishing the importance of effective classroom management strategies and an investigation of the literature to gain a better understanding of ineffective and effective rules.

Rule number 1	Rules must be rational, consistent, and easily understood.
Rule number 2	Rules must address the desired behavior and answer two questions: Is the rule necessary? and, Is a specific behavior targeted in the rule?
Rule number 3	Too many rules may defeat the behavioral or academic purpose and too many rules result in rules that are not enforced.
Rule number 4	Rules must fit within the structure of the school's Code of conduct and be consistent with the school's culture. They should be stated positively.
Rule number 5	Rules must address the ethics or moral behavior desired.

A re-examination of classroom rules

Introduction

The old adage that rules are made to be broken may have merit in some situations, but the teacher who attempts to manage a classroom, particularly at the elementary level, without well established rules will experience difficulty. Managing a well-behaved classroom of students entails the need for teaching children to care. Likewise, teaching the child to care about himself/herself and the surrounding world is a worthy goal.

For the purpose of this article, classroom management is defined as how teachers maintain order in a classroom. The classroom must not become a "revolving classroom door" where students are sent to the principal's office only to return with no gains or opportunity for learning (Rancifer, 1995). A major premise of this article is that classroom management is critical to establishing a learning environment in which every student feels free to explore and learn.

Establishing firm, but fair, classroom rules at the outset of the school year is one of the most effective strategies for coping with disruptive behavior (Malone, Bonitz, & Rickett, 1997). The freedom of one student must not be allowed to transgress upon another student's freedom. The understanding of this important principle cannot be overestimated. Our society is predicated upon established rules of law and order; we cannot start too early in teaching our children to respect and abide by them. Guernsey (1988) offered the following suggestions for managing a classroom: a) display the classroom rules; b) enforce appropriate classroom behavior; c) stick to a smooth academic routine; d) develop a self-checking system; and e) develop filing strategies to establish a consistent record-keeping system.

Children should be involved in the creation of the rules by which they will be governed. Approaches for working with children who engage in power struggles and an understanding of the logical consequences that follow a particular behavior are essential for the teacher who would teach in a responsive classroom (Charney, 1993). Student participation in rule-making encourages active involvement, ownership, reflection, meaningful connection, respect for rules, a sense of community, and problem solving through negotiation (Castle, 1993).

As students share in creating a classroom community, they may be able to imagine an ideal world with similar characteristics; however, as students become more diverse, establishing a comfortable, challenging classroom in which every student feels valued becomes more difficult. The homes from which at-risk students come represent anything but an environment in which they can take risks or explore ideas. Teachers need to minimize problems and maximize learning by shifting to a more parental perspective and make the classroom an "academic home" (Dodd, 1997).

The teacher as an authority figure is the expected model for anyone who would desire to teach (Prosise, 1996). Someone must be in charge! If that someone is not the teacher, the potential for anarchy is great. Young students have a need for structure in their lives, and few resent or resist a firm hand if it is exercised in a warm and caring manner. Respect for authority is essential in a democracy and the earlier its principles are taught the better. Techniques taught and developed in the first six weeks of school and extended through the rest of the school year literally make for success or failure (Castle, 1993). A teacher is a significant person to his or her students, and actions and comments of the teacher make a tremendous impression on students. Nothing influences behavior so strongly as the clear expectations of a significant other.

Expectations of teachers are communicated in various ways. If teachers express their expectations consistently in direct, specific terms, convey a positive attitude about the expectations, and model the desirable behaviors, they will experience more effective classroom communication. Examples of modeling such behaviors include the teacher reading personally as the students read, or writing in their own journal as students write in theirs. Modeling generates a sense of teacher authenticity. Teachers voice strong opinions about teaching students to be responsible for their own behavior. Research on effective teaching reveals strong findings related to the ability of the teacher to model the behaviors he or she wishes the students to learn. If the teacher can model the behaviors he/she wants to teach, students learn through the powerful mediums of observation and demonstration (Prosise, 1996).

Students should be taught the five positions of control--the *punisher*, the *guiltmaker*, the *buddy*, the *monitor*, and the *manager* (Gossen, 1998). As students come to understand these positions of control, they might be asked how they would like to be treated. In other words, do they want to be a teacher-controlled class or a student-controlled class? If they opt for the latter, a clear understanding of acceptable and non-acceptable behavior is a necessity.

Behavior is based on a belief system, *or* a belief system may evolve out of persistent behaviors. The ultimate goal of teaching consistent behavior may be contingent upon teaching self-control. Maag (1998) offers a different view with his Perceptual Control Theory (PCT). PCT is a general approach to understanding self-regulated systems based on the theory that behavior controls an individual's perceptions rather than the perceptions controlling behavior.

Students need self-control rather than being controlled by rewards and consequences. If the teacher is harsh or guilt inducing in his/her questions, the students respond out of fear. If the teacher persuades the students to his/her beliefs, the students respond out of conformity. Neither of these situations is the desired outcome. There is a need for a social contract in which students have ample opportunities to dialogue with their teachers and parents to seek congruity with their own beliefs and values (Gossen, 1998).

Living in the *real* world makes one keenly aware that rules will be broken. When a rule **is** broken, the consequences of breaking the rule must be known in advance. In this way a student chooses to break the rule fully cognizant of the consequences of his/her behavior. The teacher must then show consistency in administering the consequences agreed upon. In such an environment a student learns to accept responsibility for his/ her own behavior as well as make decisions about acceptable behavior in a given situation. This is the social contract. This is real! There is no make-believe here. The student decides to do whatever he does and now expects to endure the consequences or rewards of his actions. The ultimate outcome now becomes one of the student's self-judgement. Did he/she deserve the consequences? Were the consequences fair? And, can the student answer affirmatively the question, "Am I being the kind of person that I want to be, that my parents want me to be, or that the school wants me to be?" If the student can answer this question positively, progress toward self-regulating behavior is on its way. The ultimate task at this point is to ensure opportunities for making progress are made available and students build upon the progress they have made.

The opportunities to teach real-life lessons in such a scenario are great. In one instance it teaches *honesty*--the student knows about the agreed-upon rule and knows about the agreed-upon or understood consequence. Nothing could be more honest up front. At the same time it teaches *responsibility*--to accept and endure the consequences for the unacceptable behavior. The problem lies in creating an understanding of the rule and the consequences of breaking the rule.

That, in and of itself, is an opportunity to teach one of life's greatest axioms, "a person must be responsible for his/her own behavior."

Establishing rules that are designed to improve students' and teachers' lives at school can be complicated. The fact is that rules, which are seemingly simple, usually turn out to be quite complicated. Why? Because they involve human frailties and human beings bring all kinds of personal and emotional baggage to the situation. Lack of understanding, for example, about what is acceptable behavior may seem clear to the student from the middle class white neighborhood; whereas a child from a poverty stricken project area may simply not know or have experienced such behavior (Johns & Espinoza, 1996). That child from the "projects" has learned to cope with a completely different set of rules. To these children, middle class American rules are not easily understood. Many have experienced child abuse, drugs, hunger and a lesson in life "that no one is to be trusted" (Johns & Espinoza, 1996). Their life experiences serve to create an attitude of distrust and they bring this attitude to the classroom. When their perception of life comes into conflict with the establishment, they cope as best they know how-- by behaving in a manner that may not be acceptable for the teacher in the classroom.

About Rules

Rule number 1 Rules must be rational and easily understood. What does this mean? No one knows for sure, but a well-articulated rule is an excellent place to start a discussion with students about what is acceptable behavior. For example, the rule "no talking while others are talking," listed by a majority of teachers in a research study on disruptive behavior (Malone, Bonitz, & Rickett, 1997) is questionable. Is it rational? Is it easily understood? Maybe! Let's examine the rule. What does " no talking while others are talking" mean? For most, it would be obvious that when someone else is talking to the teacher, you don't talk. The student wishing to talk has a question! When does *she* get to talk? Perhaps we need to add to the rule that the students should raise their hands and be recognized before talking (Prosise, 1996). Suddenly, one of the students speaks out of turn and is not corrected by the teacher. What happens? The message is loud and clear that the rule was meant for some and not for others. Is it easily understood? This criterion may not be evident until a rule is broken or as in the preceding case, the teacher has to enforce or not enforce the rule. Consistency in enforcing rules creates for the student the opportunity to predict the teacher's behavior. The student's relationship with the teacher is related to how well the student can predict the behavior of the teacher. This relationship helps to establish a comfortable, safe, classroom environment and allows the student to concentrate on instruction and learning.

During the course of a teaching day, the preceding scenario is repeated numerous times and in various ways. Students do not perceive consistency and therefore legitimately do not recognize the acceptable behavior. Is the rule faulty? Probably not! More likely, the fault lies with the students' lack of understanding. If the teacher could create an understanding of the rule to the extent that students perceived it as necessary for them to have a fun and successful class, it is probable that the students would begin to police themselves and thereby help the teacher. Most children want to be loved and liked by their peers, and what is acceptable behavior to the teacher is important to the student in that class.

What does "the rule should be rational" mean? What is rational in one situation may not be rational in another. What is rational to one person may not be perceived alike by all. Classroom rules should be clear and precise. They should communicate desired behaviors to all students (Johns & Espinoza, 1996) .The rule should have a purpose that is clearly understood by all. Example, rules for moving around in a boat such as "keep a low center of gravity when

moving from one seat to another" has a direct purpose of keeping one from falling into the water. In a school's laboratory or industrial education area rules are often for the purpose of safety. Any violation of such rules puts students' physical safety in jeopardy. If the purpose of the rule is clear to the student, behavior that breaks the rule should be interpreted as purposeful behavior and must be dealt with as near the time of the offending action as possible. The purpose of the rule may be the critical teaching element if the teacher is going to help the students become self-regulating learners.

Students should be taught that all humans are internally motivated by basic needs. Gossen (1998) promotes restitution restructuring as a concept in which students are taught to be their own counselor and take ownership of their own behavior. Students learn to meet their needs in ways that do not harm others. The goal of restitution restructuring is to restore children to the group by repairing and strengthening relationships, without creating discomfort. As students become self-regulating learners, they practice owning up to their own mistakes and taking ownership for their own contributions to the problem.

Rule number 2 Rules must address the behavior desired. In other words, the teacher should make rules that deal with the behavior that is necessary for an optimum learning environment. Is the rule necessary? Is a specific behavior targeted in the rule? If the answer to either of these is "No" the rule should probably be removed from the list of acceptable rules for the class.

If the rule specifies the desired behavior, the teacher will have an easier time of enforcing it simply by prescribing behavior that is incompatible with it. When a student is required to act out a behavior that is incompatible with the desired behavior, he/she has an opportunity to see the situation from the other point of view. Often, the student simply does not have the perspective to see the situation from a viewpoint other than his/her own. This opportunity to reflect may be just what the doctor (or teacher in this case) ordered.

Alfie Kohn relates a case of students who have been taught using the restitution restructuring approach. He concludes that when self discipline is taught to students, students are able to work independently to find solutions; the relationship between the offending parties is strengthened, each student learns a better way to manage his/her future behavior, and the class participates in the solution. Parents validate the process of self-discipline and healing thereby reinforcing what the school has taught. Kohn states, "I can't imagine a situation in which we would remove the chance for students to learn how to make good choices anymore than I can imagine a situation where we would remove the chance for them to learn how to read" (Kohn, 1996).

Rule number 3 Too many rules may defeat the behavioral or academic purpose. How many constitute enough? There is no definitive answer to this question, but the wise and seasoned teacher knows when the time comes for no more rules. Wise and seasoned here does not mean a teacher who has taught a long period of time; it simply means the professional who has the wisdom of knowing what is appropriate when working with students.

Too many rules result in rules that are not enforced. The ones that are not enforced become targets of abuse that erode the effectiveness of the others. With too many rules, the classroom becomes a regimented environment and one in which the students strive to keep all the rules, rather than striving to learn all they can and have fun in the process. The behavioral and learning environment is out of focus. Often in such a structured environment, students see little opportunity for self-determination. They are told what to do and are not allowed to think and choose appropriate behaviors. It is rare that we learn to behave in an acceptable manner

without opportunity to practice and become comfortable with the behavior. Too many rules take away the initiative to choose the appropriate behavior, and self-discipline is no longer a realistic goal.

Howard and Norris (1994) found an average of 5.6 rules for classroom management in their research of two large school systems. Rules in this study fell into five basic categories: speaking rules, interaction rules, movement rules, rules regarding supplies and assignment rules. Teachers acting alone made just over 36% of the rules, whereas the teacher **and** students established slightly over 56%. Students acting alone established only 1.85% of the rules. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the rules were worded as positive behaviors as opposed to negative, and the number of years that a teacher had taught had no relationship to the number of rules the teachers established for their classrooms. More experienced teachers did not differ from their less experienced counterparts in the number of rules, and there was no perceived difference as to the effectiveness of the rules. This study summarized three points about rules: rules should be limited in number, positive in tone, and mutually determined by the teacher and students.

Rule number 4 Rules must fit within the structure of the school's *Code of Conduct*. Parents must be aware of the *Code of Conduct* that is expected at the school; likewise, the individual teacher must be aware of his/her own classroom rules and how consistent they are with the school's objectives. If possible, the rules should be stated in positive terms. This is often not the case when one studies a school's published *Code*. Under the gun to comply with due process requirements, *Codes of Conduct* are often written from the negative viewpoint. The first time a specific behavior happens, certain consequences follow; the second time it happens the consequences usually are more severe; however, the due process requirements mandate that the offender must know what is going to happen if the rule is broken. Often, in the process of complying with due process, teachers reinforce negative behaviors.

When rules are broken and the consequences are to be meted out, the "revolving classroom door" mentioned earlier should be avoided. In this situation students who misbehave are sent to the principal's office and return to the classroom without substantial changes in behavior. The student "revolves" from the principal's office back to the classroom with no clear understanding of the unacceptable behavior and the rule that had been transgressed. In such a case, the principal and teacher have created a new problem or possibly worsened the existing one, rather than providing a solution. Teachers must establish clear, achievable classroom rules that correspond to school campus rules established by the administrative staff (Thompson & Walker, 1998).

Acceptable or unacceptable conduct must be understood throughout the school. This understanding must include every teacher, every student, and certainly the administrator(s). Parents should be included also. Teachers need to communicate with parents through email, daily assignment logs, hot lines, and by daily and weekly reports. Messages should be consistently updated in order for parents to be kept informed. With the technology that is available in most schools, updating is not a major problem, but the teacher who records messages on an infrequent basis will lose credibility (Rosen, 1992).

In the case of the administrator, the nuances of individual teachers regarding behavioral requirements must be considered. In all cases such nuances must be kept within the guidelines of the *Code of Conduct*. Students should not be expected to adjust to extreme expectations from one teacher to the next. When discipline problems persist, the school rules, the corresponding penalties, and rewards in light of the principles that underlie the discipline plan, should be reevaluated (Williams, 1993).

Are the rules consistent with the school's culture? In managing behavior, the term consistency is a true criterion in the mind of the student. When students say they want their teacher to be fair, they may be saying they really want their teacher to be consistent. Why is consistency so important to students? It is simply a matter of being able to interpret expectations for a given situation. When a student can interpret the expectations accurately, behaving in a manner that is consistent with the expectations may not be as big a deal. Students question whether the rules are consistent from school to the district to the home. Obviously, parents have greater leeway in dealing with their own children than school officials, but upon close analysis, acceptable behavior is usually the objective of both.

Job descriptions for learners and teachers is an idea promoted through restitution restructuring in which each party to a rule is clear on the exact role to be played. Everyone concerned must agree on the task. This might include parents. The tasks are verbalized by each party as follows: Students say, "My job is....", Parents say, "My job is...", and teachers say, "My job is..."

Rule number 5 Rules must address the ethics or moral behavior desired. Classroom rules are not merely instrumental management tools. They are structures of meaning used by teachers and students to comprehend daily living. As students embrace or reflect rules, they engage in short-term behaviors and in far-reaching ways of thinking about themselves and the world (Boostrom, 1991). The teacher must create an understanding of the classroom rules and establish sound reasons for them. A well-focused discussion would be an excellent topic for inclusion in "class meetings." Students get involved in the rule-making process, discuss norms of behavior, ask reflective questions of other students and build classroom unity and cooperation. If this can be accomplished, the teacher has gone a long-way towards building an optimum learning environment (Letts, 1994). The discussion needs to be established early and referred to continuously throughout the year.

Rule number 6 The rule must include the roles for primary stakeholders, i.e., students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Parents must perceive themselves as partners in the education process of their children. Teachers must learn to utilize the efforts of parents in building a support team for students. Likewise, administrators must support teachers and parents in their efforts to collaborate in the teaching/learning process. Firm and clear bottom-line rules with the support of parents on critical issues such as no drugs, no harassment of other students, and no dangerous defiance, form a positive base for teaching acceptable behavior in a school setting. The time and effort of conducting parent support group meetings enhances the relationships between parents, teachers, students, and administrators. Administrator, teacher, parent, and student partnerships can alleviate the need for alternative high schools and therefore decrease the costs of lost learning time, as well as grade repetition, public assistance, and future incarceration for troubled youth.

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Corporate Source: Paper presented at the annual Mid-Western Educational Research Conference, October 14-17, 1998 in Chicago, Illinois	Publication Date: 10/17/98

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